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AUTHOR Scott, Robert A.
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ABSTRACT

Personnel officers, like other middle-level collegiate administrators, have become so concerned with their status on campus that they have forgotten their role, which is to serve: to serve the goals of the institution, which are or should be educational goals established by the faculty and its leaders. Personnel is now a vulnerable area, but its promise is great. At every level of operation and at every level of rank, personnel officers have unique opportunities to serve. If they suffer from an inferiority complex, feel they have low status, and shuffle paper more than they shake hands, it may be their own fault. They must start jumping (collectively, of course), and opportunity will come their way. (Author/MSE)

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Misdirected Missionaries:
Personnel Officers in Academe

Robert A. Scott

Cornell University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Robert A. Scott

I have twenty minutes and the time of your questions later to demonstrate how my study of administrative organization, sponsored by the Exxon Education Foundation, and my experiences as an academic dean qualify me to comment on human resource management and the personnel profession. Because of my background, my bridge to academe also has a branch going to academic support services.

I have been told to keep my remarks brief, so I will do my best. But I will not follow the example of the cub reporter who was told to keep his story to the barest essentials. Following these orders, the next day he produced this: "J. Smith looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on its way down. It was. Age 45."

For the past nine months I nave been studying the effects of federal regulations on the costs of collegiate operations and on the nature and role of middle-level administrative positions. I have interviewed several hundred people and have read widely in the journals of numerous groups.[1] After reading the exhortations to your professionalism in the CUPA Journal and in the report on The CUPA Wingspread Conference, "Human Resource Management in Higher Education," I was reminded of the

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1. This research on middle-managers will be reported in , among other publications, my Lords, Squires, and Yeomen: Collegiate Middle-Managers and Their Organizations. Washington, D.C.: ERIC/AAHE Higher Education Research Report No. 5, 1978; Published by the American Association for Higher Education; In progress.

ambitious young graduate who asked a great merchant to reveal the secret of his success. "There is no secret," said the merchant. "Just jump at your opportunity."

"But," said the youth, "how can I tell when my opportunity is coming?"

"You can't, said the merchant. "You just have to keep jumping."

Personnel Officers must keep jumping, too. I hope I can help illuminate some issues worth jumping for.

Like most administrative groups, personnel officers feel excluded from the core decisions of their institutions. Admissions officers, Registrars, and Financial Aid officers feel the same. So do others. But most of those others -- public affairs and student development officials -- report to a vice presidential-level officer in their specialty. The first group does not. Personnel is in a stage of transition. Your special contribution is being recognized with vice presidents here and there, but not uniformly.

I became interested in the status and role of middle managers during the late 'sixties when I was studying admissions philosophies and federal aid programs, and became increasingly aware that while students were at the barricades and faculty were using parliamentary procedure to determine their institution's stance on Cambodia and Vietnam, unknown and unheralded administrators were doing yeoman service in keeping our colleges open.

Those two terms, yeoman and service, set me to thinking. It seemed to me that college administrators are ordered along several dimensions. There are the Lords of cabinet rank who may be called vice presidents in large institutions or directors in smaller ones. (These are not, however, the royalty found in every college; president and provost, and perhaps a senior vice president.) There are Squires with major responsibilities in functional areas who may be called directors or officers. And there are Yeomen who in large institutions may be associates and in smaller ones maybe the only one charged with several responsibilities that in larger institutions have their own offices.

Lords, Squires, and Yeomen, these are the middle-level collegiate administrators I have been studying. They are the deans and directors of support services to whom their assistants and first-line, most often non-exempt, supervisors report and who themselves report to or are an officer at the vice-presidential level. They are the men and women in admissions, Registrar, business and personnel offices, public affairs, student personnel, and similar non-academic areas. While the number and organization of such services vary according to the size of the host campus, the essential duties remain the same.

Basically, these staffs fulfill three functions. They serve as liaison with external suppliers of resources, be they financial or human; they implement procedures for internal allocation of resources and control of activities, especially

in matters of campus coordination and compliance with external requirements; and they work with student activities and curricular responsibilities in helping students become oriented to college requirements, standards, and opportunities. They serve. They don't just work at a job. They serve. And that is an important distinction.

But, in general, that service is not much appreciated by others in the institution. Let my findings about financial aid officers serve as an example.

They are a young group, in existence really for only for nineteen years, and a group of young people, many of whom are recent graduates of their institutions. I have found them particularly interesting because of the conflicts they face. They entered the career field to work with students, but find that they work mostly with paper. They have high institutional loyalty, but must look off-campus for training, guidance, recognition, colleagueship, and rewards. They are highly oriented to service, but find increasing pressures to exert controls. They have little substantial contact with faculty and senior officers, but want higher status on campus. They exhibit highly desired traits of behavior -- tolerance for ambiguity, administrative ability, fiscal ability, and interpersonal skills -- but also experience a very high rate of turnover.

I invoke these thoughts about financial aid officers as a way to lead into my observations about personnel officers.

With too few exceptions, the personnel officers I have interviewed confine themselves to routine matters and have little contact on campus with either the faculty or the royalty. There is virtually no contact with students. Yet these same personnel officers could be doing much more, as your self-study group has suggested. The great variety of talents and office structures represented here have great promise for the future. You represent more variety than most other administrative groups and, therefore, more possibility.

Based on my findings, I conceptually have organized personnel functions and officers into four categories, which are related to the size and complexity of the college or university organization. The classifications I use are borrowed from the political economists' lexicon. They are the primitive stage, the primary stage, the secondary stage, the tertiary stage, and the post-modern stage.

In the first, or primitive stage, there is no single personnel officer identified. The functions of employment and maintenance of records are greatly decentralized, with many tasks the responsibility of the chief administrative officer's secretary.

At the next level, the primary, which the political economists use to label socieites which base their employment on extractive industries like fishing and mining, there is in our case a personnel officer who with his staff is responsible for employment activities, benefits management, and records maintenance.

At this level, the personnel officer is most likely a Yeoman.

A secondary economy is based on processing, fabricating, or manufacturing. For our use, the secondary stage includes, in addition to the functions mentioned previously, wage, salary, and unemployment insurance administration, employee orientation and relations, and personnel policy development. The director at this stage is a Squire in my terms, an officer with considerable responsibility.

The tertiary level is a service economy in which government, education, health, hospitality, and recreation are major employers. This is the stage of "people" work. In our model, the personnel department offers the programs mentioned earlier, and others, such as personnel development and training, labor relations, and perhaps even performance evaluation.

And then there are you post-moderns, or Lords, who occupy the stage in which organizational development and planning, organizational systems analysis and development, staff development and manpower planning, and perhaps personnel counseling, are preeminent concerns. I have the idea that attainment of this last stage is viewed as the goal by many in CUPA. This is the stage of the "comprehensive personnel program" or the "total personnel program." I think it may be this goal that causes your spokesmen to dwell so heavily on relations with top management and on strategies to incorporate faculty employment concerns into the personnel officers domain.

But I submit that your eyes are misdirected. Personnel

officers, and other middle-level administrators, have become so concerned with their status on campus that they have forgotten their role, which is to serve: to serve the goals of the institution, which are or should be educational goals established by the faculty and its leaders. The fact that new programs and ancillary departments and positions have been created does not mean that learning has been moved from its central position in the mission of higher education. So leave faculty employment and development to the academics. We serve them. Don't covet a royal charter. You can wield considerable influence behind the scenes and earn the respect of those who count.

I have said briefly why I think personnel officers are misdirected. Why do I call them "misdirected missionaries"? Because they are in a unique position of service to the human resources needed to accomplish the institution's goals. But to the extent that they look only to top management, legal counsel, and non-exempt staff as their clients and ignore those around them, including academic department chairman and fellow Lords, Squires and Yeomen, personnel officers are misdirected missionaries.

Personnel is now a vulnerable area, but its promise is great. It is vulnerable to criticism because it is growing in size and scale for what generally are reasons unknown to the campus community, which is losing other services, and the only results experienced by many are lost job applications, numerous

and complicated forms, excessive standardization, too little flexibility, and no apparent coordination between the personnel and payroll officers. Has it occurred to you that in this period of ever-increasing faculty influence over budgets that the major contact between academic offices and your personnel office is a clerk who may well be several pay grades lower and less well-educated than those with whom she deals daily. Or that your contacts are about bad news like overtime payments, scores of job candidates when the department wants to promote from within or expand the duties of someone already on the staff, or no adequate applicants when the department is desparate for help.

Some of us in academic administration know your workload because we have worked with you on new salary classification surveys, employee grievances, benefits, or training. But many of the influentials on campus have no contact with Personnel. To help them understand your function, why not issue an annual report by way of the campus newspaper. The results can be salutory. Our Ombudsman's office does this with good results. Our admissions office issues a voluntary annual report that has totally quieted a previously vocal and suspicious faculty.

I agree that you should communicate ideas, problems, trends, etc. to the top, and that you should be sensitive to the populations who come to your office, but there are others who deserve your attention, too. Academic department chairmen, deans, and search committee chairmen are among them.

Another group deserving of special attention are your

peers in administration. Dr. Len Persson emphasized this point at the Wingspread Conference. Before you can advise or serve on the management team, he said, there must be a team. I have been amazed to find in my study how little contact there is between middle-level administrators, and how much misunderstanding there is among them. Each group tends to characterize the other in a less flattering light. Financial Aid officers complain about their low pay, just one up from the bottom rung occupied by Book Store managers. And they blame you for self-fulfilling salary surveys. (I haven't interviewed the Book Store people, but I wonder what they say.) Financial Aid Officers downgrade admissions, with which they are often associated, as routine, and think they should earn as much as Development Officers because of the federal financial aid they bring in. Admissions Officers think that marketing for students is highly complex, and that financial aid officers just file applications to the government and pay too little attention to enrollment needs. Personnel Officers think that those who handle money have more status than those whose concerns are people, even though through benefit programs and unemployment insurance they are responsible for large portions of the institution's budget. And we have all heard the initial cries of pain and the later sighs of rationalization when affirmative action and collective bargaining become located in other offices on campus. But you should not lose touch with these issues. They are among the most critical facing our institutions. Let

me address the first just briefly.

It was for political reasons that advocates wanted affirmative action to report to a high officer, preferably the president, but the result generally has been to create a staff office whose signal achievement has been to open up administrative positions more widely to women and minorities. Affirmative action has not been well-served, and won't succeed in support staff areas, until line managers feel some responsibility for making it happen.

Like the Financial Aid Officers described earlier, most middle-level collegiate administrators appear to be highly motivated with a strong affinity to their institutions, but find little in the way of training for new complexities, acknowledgement of doing important work, or reward for their role on the campus. They must turn off-campus to their national associations for these benefits. It is off-campus that these managers are sought for their knowledge and opinions; on campus, no one asks. Their expertise there is thought to be common knowledge. Even the best known members of professions may be found silent on their own campuses.

It seems to me that even while everyone is in some sense a personnel officer, it is the Personnel Officer who should take the initiative in manpower planning and make the campus community aware of the service and the needs of middle-managers. The Personnel director is not and should not act like the superior of his administrative colleagues, but he can legiti-

mately serve as a coordinator and convenor on human resource problems and issues.

Your Self-Study has made some fine recommendations. Let me underscore some and add a few of my own. Serve yourselves by serving others. Offer procedural guidance on matters of employment and other areas you should be expert in. Don't ask for a vote; take the opportunity to influence. Provide data on employment trends, interpretations of new laws and regulations, and report on your activities. For some reason, many people on campus think that you must not do much if they don't know what what you do. Develop, find, share, and encourage the use of training programs on and off campus for middle-managers, department chairmen, and others. In addition to formal training programs, there are short courses, internships, and informal exchanges with other colleges available and possible. Review your procedures annually; invite people from other offices in to see the staff they talk with on the phone; open up your staff and your procedures to suggestions. This does not mean that you must change carefully thought out procedures at everyone else's whim, but who ever said you had a monopoly on good ideas?

The following may seem self-evident, but I have to say it. Respect others' questions. I held a meeting once for an exchange between academic department secretaries and a section of our personnel office. The secretaries attended in large numbers and asked thoughtful questions. The other staff answered in

the same, arrogant, "Oh, really" tone that had precipitated the need for the meeting. The personnel officer in charge of that staff and I had a good post-meeting session.

Be missionaries of good will. When was the last time you offered to help a dean plan for the impact of an increase in the minimum wage on next year's budget? When was the last time you offered to review that recent TAA-CREF mailing at a faculty meeting? When did you last offer to help a new dean or department chairperson understand the employment regulations that will affect him or her. Sure, he has a career administrator or a seasoned aide, but who's sure that he knows?

In a section of the Wingspread report, Mr. Robert Hayes talks about politics and strategy. Read it and heed it. He's right. Much can be done to help academic administrators, but they will resist the wrong approach, and poorly chosen terms. They won't want to be "trained", but in my experience they sure want help. Respect the symbols of academe, and you will find respect for your work.

At every level of operation, primary, secondary, tertiary, and post-modern, and at every level of rank, Lords, Squires and Yeomen, Personnel Officers have unique opportunities to serve. If you suffer from an inferiority complex, feel you have low status, and shuffle paper more than you shake hands, it may be your own fault. Start jumping -- selectively, of course -- and opportunity will come your way. The merchant says so.

Thank you.